The Educational Function of Choir Schools.

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by

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It is probably true that the real value of educational institutions is at its highest when they are least discussed. A discussion deals, of necessity, with general questions, and so far as it deals with individuals at all is rather too apt to concentrate attention upon freaks—the boy whose attitude towards music or games or caning is quite peculiar. But the Schoolmaster has to deal with a lot of individuals, whom he knows as individuals, who in many cases may develope freakishly, yet ought to be and expect to be treated under general rules. It is, therefore, in a measure against my better judgement that I venture to speak in general terms about one type of school. I hope I shall do no damage to the Choir School fraternity by attempting to express opinions on the subject. And I may add that there are two reasons that in some degree embolden me to proceed: (1) I have had to do for some years with a Choir School; (2) I find it easier to talk to choir boys freely than to others of their age, because, as a rule, they are very definitely interested in music, whereas most boys deem it necessary to assume a contemptuous attitude towards everything done in school, and I cannot join in a conversation about games, having never played them, or known great players. My lack in this respect is of the less importance, because the games are common ground to schools of various kinds, while the music, and the responsibility in the Cathedral, belong to Choir Schools only. I propose, then, in considering the educational aspect of Choir Schools, to deal shortly with two subjects which inevitably form a large part of the life of a Choir School, music and religion: and I shall then say something about the effect of the very heavy responsibility which inevitably falls on the leading boys.

In speaking of music, one has to remember that at the present time there has taken place a very considerable change in the estimate of it. Till recently, music was regarded by the average

Englishman as somewhat effeminate and often mischievous. It is very difficult to understand how this came about. If we read about Elizabethan days and the times soon after the Restoration, it would appear that a knowledge of music, and often a considerable skill in its practice, was very common indeed. By the end of the 18th century all this seems to have completely disappeared. If it had not been for the Cathedrals, I cannot imagine what would have become of English music. Handel, no doubt, made a deep impression upon the English mind, and Crotch in his professorial lectures dealt with Handel as the ideal type of a composer, somewhat as Sir Joshua Reynolds had held up Michael Angelo as the ideal of a painter. There was, I suppose, no regular system of training in music apart from the Cathedrals, and the ordinary practice of it had dwindled almost to nothing. Sir Frederick Ouseley, who was well off and could do as he liked, was among a very small number of people who pursued music for its own sake, and I have often heard him tell of the situation as he knew it when a boy. In the middle of the last century the influence of Mendelssohn must have been very effective in producing a new view of things, and there were Cathedral organists like S. S. Wesley, Goss and Stainer who did much to develope musical interest and knowledge. I can remember circumstances which illustrate the old view. On the Sunday before August 4th, 1914, I was asked to give an address in Balliol Chapel at a Service held for a Summer School of working men that was beginning a course in Oxford. I was Vice-Chancellor at the time. I went over to Balliol with one of my colleagues at Christ Church, G. K. A. Bell, now Bishop of Chichester. When we got to the College gate, the Master, Dr. Strachan-Davidson, was waiting for us. The Master said he was sorry to have to tell us that the organist had not turned up. I said that it did not matter. Bell would read prayers, and I would play the organ. "My dear Mr. Vice-Chancellor," said the Master, "that would be most improper." Fortunately, when we got to the Chapel, the organist was there, so the situation was saved.

I think that this attitude has finally disappeared, and it would be agreed by almost all people concerned, for instance, with our Public Schools, that there is a real educational value in music. But I think that here it is necessary to be cautious. I have heard music defended, almost on the lines of a physical exercise; as if boys had so much good bellowing imprisoned within them which it is well to let out. It may be that they have, but that is not the ground upon which music can be defended educationally. To be of educational value, I am sure that the music used should be good music and be known as such by the boys. The leader in bringing this point of view into Public School life was J. P. David, the music master for many years at Uppingham. He had lived in early days with the great fellowship of musicians which included Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms and Joachim. The Head Master, Dr. Thring, gave him his fling, and if you come across people who were at Uppingham in those days, you will know what it meant to them. But this requirement of good music is especially important in Church music and is especially easy to satisfy in Cathedrals. There is in them a long tradition of fine music into which every Cathedral Choir should enter; the music there ought always to be of a high character, and, owing to the large amount of good Church music there is, it never need be anything else.

This principle, I must admit, seems to me axiomatic or almost so. But I am, of course, aware that there are many, perhaps not here, but in many places, who would contest it. The higher kind of music, it is said, is necessarily over the heads of Choir boys, and the direct appeal of inferior but attractive music affects their minds for good. I think it is possible that at the very beginning of their career they may feel satisfaction in poor and obvious music, but I am quite sure that it is seriously wrong to let them rest in it, and that they find out for themselves the difference between the good and the bad. Many of you know a Lamentation by Gounod, called "Gallia." It was written to express the anguish of France after the Franco-German War.

At the end there is a soprano solo, of a highly emotional kind, in which the singer is taken up to high B natural just before the end. This was occasionally performed in Christ Church Cathedral. One day I asked the boy who had done the solo very well, what he thought of it. His answer was, "It's jolly to sing, but you can't help thinking it's rather cheap." Probably poor old Gounod was never more sincere in his life than when he wrote this, but the boy's criticism was just, and I do not think he would have made it, if it had not been for his Cathedral training. I could quote plenty of other instances.

I do not think that this development of perception and taste is in any sense to be undervalued. If music were, as seems to be sometimes assumed, a mere expression of emotion, it would still seem to me desirable to distinguish sharply between lofty and cheap emotion. Those of you who are older will remember the sort of half-comic incredibly vulgar Valentines which used to appear in the shops about February 14th. They appealed, I suppose, to some people, but I think most of us would have felt some shock if a person whom we, in ordinary ways, respected had confessed to finding emotional satisfaction in them. Yet people are less disturbed if they find others deriving pleasure from music which is on the artistic level of the old-fashioned Valentine. I venture to think it a very great misfortune if such a thing occurs, and I think musical training in good music is a real gain to every one who can get it, and I am sure it quickens the mind in general. Church music in a good Choir makes demands upon the time of the boys; this is a frequent indictment of Choir Schools. Yet I was told some time ago by a Fellow of Magdalen that in the School which is attached to the College, and in which the Magdalen Choristers are educated, the choir boys gained more than their proportion of prizes; their music quickened their wits.

These considerations lead me on to the next point upon which I wish to dwell—the religious element in the life of a Choir School. It is, I think, true that there is in nature and in history

a close connexion between music and religion. In Browning's language, music deals with "mysterious motions of the soul, no way to be defined save in strange melodies," and there is something of this mysterious indefinable content in religion. It has developed, Otto assures us, out of a mysterious sense of a presence in things, into the conviction of a God who reveals Himself in the world and in history, and through whose self-revelation the experience of man finds its unity and its explanation. That is, if it is a true account of religion, the inarticulate form of the religious sense, which becomes articulate in prayer and worship and all the other ways in which religion expresses itself. Music has always been connected with religion in its various forms, and that is no doubt right. But it has always to be remembered that religion is capable of being presented in crude and unsatisfactory forms, and that the history of it has consisted in a constant struggle between unworthy expressions of it and its loftier manifestations. These divergent manifestations of it are to be found at all stages in its history. In Christianity itself, we find, in ritual and at times in religious thought, inferior and imperfect developments. We have only to think of the lives of Saints, of Eucharistic doctrine, and of pagan ritual survivals in various forms, to be sure that there are risks attaching to the expression of the religious idea. The highest tradition of English Church Music is free to a large extent of these unsatisfactory associations; the words to which it is set, the restraint of its musical form, associate it most closely with the high conception of religion which the Bible sets forth. Poor and voluptuous music is like the tendency which is noticeable in non-Christian and undeveloped religion to concentrate attention on mere emotional excitement; it really heathenizes religion.

This leads to another point, as to which much criticism is directed. The boy in a Cathedral Choir usually has to attend perhaps two full services every day of his life. No doubt this involves strain and the danger of unreality. But the variety and the character of the music tends to reduce these dangers to a

minimum. If the music as well as the words were largely the same every day, it would be very difficult to expect any boy to keep his attention; but this is not so unreasonable a demand when the music varies through a limited, but still an extensive, area of change. And when besides this the music is of a high standard and appropriate, it strengthens the hold of the mind upon the religious ideas and aspirations of the words. There will of course always be boys to whom religion makes very little appeal, just as there are boys in every Public School who find no interest in any of the work they are expected to do. But a boy who has the elements of religion in him, and music enough to learn the value of the varied Cathedral tradition, will be better educated for religious life in the Church of England than anyone else. I think that one of the reasons why boys leave off going to Church when they get away from school is that, at school, they are regaled with fancy Services—supposed to be more suitable than the Prayer Book Services—and when they leave all their religion has been developed and associated with fancy and occasional forms of prayer. So far from being trained, as Church of England boys might expect to be, for Church of England worship, they are as little at home as a row of foreigners. All people need training in religion and in worship; in many schools nothing occurs that really bears on Church of England religion.

I should claim, then, that the years a boy spends in a Choir School may be reasonably expected to be of the highest value both in the training of the mind and in religion.

There is another matter, lying close to these two, upon which a few words must be said. Few people who have not seen the working of a Cathedral Choir from the inside, know how much of its effectiveness and success depends upon the boys. If you think over your experience of a good Cathedral Choir, you will remember how very rarely the boys sing actual wrong notes, or forget to come in, or otherwise create confusion, and how skilful they often show themselves in hitching things back into order, or

dealing with emergencies. This is due in part to a boyish keenness about what they are doing and to the absence from their minds of anxieties such as harass older people. But it also means a very strong sense of responsibility. The leading boys have an extraordinary burden thrown upon them, partly from the nature of their work, and partly beause the British public is as a rule conscious mainly of the treble part, so that a mistake in that part cannot be hidden, whereas mistakes elsewhere can. It cannot but be of great value to a boy all his life long to have had to adapt himself to a situation which makes so serious a demand upon his character.

I think in a way Choristers are aware of the importance of their Cathedral, and conscious of the privilege of belonging to it. And for this reason I think that every effort should be made to help them to feel the dignity of belonging to a great Foundation, and helping in its work.

For all these reasons I have acquired a very strong belief in the value of Choir Schools as a means of training in mental alertness, religious perception, and the sense of responsibility, and my experience at Christ Church leads me to think that these results are, in various degrees, normal rather than otherwise. I have never met any choir boy at all resembling the choir boy one finds in songs, who goes to heaven in the last verse with triplets in the accompaniment, and the loud pedal. They are usually very natural and boy-like—they criticize one another and the performance of the men with devastating candour and sincerity, and I very rarely meet anything remotely resembling the airs of a *prima donna* among them. The singing is part of their daily life, and the higher results of it develope in them rather unconsciously, and perhaps, for this reason, are all the more real. So I would say to all who have part in the management of Choir Schools, "Go on and prosper."